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‘Best way to silence the haters? Raheem Sterling’s use of social media and selective press interviews in the fight against racism

Jonathan Cable

Introduction

English footballer Raheem Sterling is no stranger to the media spotlight. On 28 May 2018, *The Sun* newspaper published a front-page article criticising the Manchester City and England player’s choice of getting a gun tattoo on his leg (Moyes & Diaz, 2018). This, and other reports depicting aspects of Sterling’s lifestyle, has led to British journalism coming under increased scrutiny for its continued negative stereotypical representation of non-white football players. Sterling suffered racist abuse in December 2017 when leaving training at Manchester City a man started to verbally abuse him calling him a ‘black scouse c**t’ and ‘I hope your mother and child wake up dead in the morning, you n****r’ (Press Association, 2017). Sterling was also kicked four times. Secondly, he has consistently used non-traditionally football outlets to make his case and campaign against racism. For instance, in an interview with eminent sports journalist Rory Smith (2019), he said that the way he is covered is ‘one million per- cent’ based on the colour of his skin. He has also spoken to the *Wall Street Journal* (2019), appeared in *Complex UK* (Pellatt, 2019), on the athlete driven *Players’ Tribune* (Sterling, 2018a) and in the *Financial Times* (Mance, 2019).

Several of these interviews came after Sterling’s experience of racism while playing against Chelsea in their home ground Stamford Bridge in December 2018 (*Observer Sport*, 2018). Following the incident Sterling used his Instagram account for activism by questioning press coverage of two young Manchester City players buying houses, one white and one black; the difference in story was stark and will be explored in more detail later (Sterling, 2018b). In doing this Sterling is performing a framing analysis as set out by Entman (1993) whereby frames have three functions. The first and second frames diagnose the cause of issues and make a judgement based on this diagnosis such as an explicit link between the incident at Chelsea and the representation of black footballers. Then he suggests solutions by asking for ‘fair publicity’ (Sterling, 2018b). Sterling’s Instagram post was not about himself even though the press have scrutinised his private life, including buying a house (Moriarty & Wilkins, 2016). It is this coverage and Sterling’s own framing that is at the heart of this chapter. The key question under investigation is how the conflicting and contrasting frames around Sterling have changed over time.

Accordingly, this chapter explores how Sterling is framed by analysing a mixture of press coverage, including Sterling’s media interviews, and his social media. Furthermore, it details how racism became framed in a similar way to the social movements framing of issues (see Snow & Benford, 1992; Sireau, 2009; Cable, 2016; Boykoff & Carrington 2019). This was conducted to argue that the power of alternative platforms allows athletes to confront racism, and discriminative press stereotypes. Social media and athlete self-representation challenges the press’ communicative power by breaking and redistributing what Entman (1993) defined as the ‘imprint of power’ found in the press’ dominant framing of contentious issues.

Race, nationality and media framing

There are two clear ideas informing the research in this chapter. The first is around race and nationalism and how Sterling’s status as an England international impacted on his representation. This leads to the second theme of media representation and the use of racial stereotyping and presenting a certain type of English identity within which players must perform to be accepted by the press (Carrington, 2001). Athletes’ private lives are frequently reported beyond the sports pages akin to celebrities where scandal can, and does, create a vortex of publicity around individuals (Whannel, 2002). Moreover, celebrity gossip is used as a form of social control and player conduct either garners public recognition or public condemnation (Levin et al., 1988). Critcher (1991) has spoken about this as players being defined by the culture outside of sport, which is often shaped and defined by the press. In other words, Sterling’s representation is divorced from his playing ability and is more centred on his race, background and celebrity status.

The representation of male footballers in England is connected to ideas around nation. The men’s English national team is seen to represent national identity and the reporting of the team serves to use positives and negatives to discipline said identity (Carrington, 1998). I have written previously about how a nation sees itself reflected in football media and the formation of the Proper Football Man archetype, a majority white, English challenge to globalisation processes defending against a perceived foreign threat (Cable, 2021). To see how race has worked in the past we need to draw on two former England internationals Ian Wright and John Barnes. Wright embodies a more traditional, populist form of nationalism but has challenged racism in the past (Carrington, 2001, p. 104). Wright described the Sterling coverage as containing a ‘certain amount of racism’ (quoted in BBC Sport, 2018). Barnes was seemingly never fully accepted despite being an English international being middle class and Jamaican-born impacted on his representation (Carrington, 2001, pp. 110–112).

Like Barnes, Sterling is Jamaican-born but grew up in London with little money. What these players have had to do

is balance racial identity and national identity. The assumption is that Englishness is synonymous with whiteness, regardless of evidence to the contrary, and the mythical constructs of identity in journalism results in ‘myth upholds some beliefs but degrades others. It celebrates but also excoriates. It affirms but it also denies’ (Lule, 2001, p. 119). The mix of race and nationalism is in line with Billig’s (1995) classic study *Banal Nationalism* and the everyday flagging of nation. He states that:

As men scan for the results of their avoured team, they read of the deeds of other men doing battle, in the cause of that larger body, the team. And often the team is the nation battling for honor against foreigners.

(Billig 1995, p. 124)

Steering this argument towards how athletes are covered brings into consideration constructions of celebrity and the focus on the private lives of high-profile individuals. Those covered in papers like *The Sun* and *Daily Mail* become situated in society through their background and private life, and this narrative is what sets the agenda for discussions of the England men’s national team. This is what Marshall (2014, p. 241) argues is ‘the capacity of these public figures to embody the collective in the individual, which identifies their cultural signs as powerful’.

What has been mentioned so far plays into concepts and ideas around how different societal actor’s frame issues. On a basic level, a frame is defined as the presentation of an issue from the viewpoint of a particular actor. Here in lies a fundamental conflict between whose frame becomes the most salient. In the past the media acted as a ‘validator’ in deciding ‘whose views need to be taken seriously’ (Gamson & Meyer, 1996, p. 290). Furthermore, Entman insists that frames put forth an ‘imprint of power’ onto a text (1993, p. 55). Social media presents an entirely different arena for issues to be defined. High-profile individuals’ reach on social media outstrips many of the media outlets who cover them. This plays into what McDonald and Birrell (1999, p. 284) argue as ‘a particular incident or celebrity as the site for exploring the complex interrelated and fluid character of power relations as they are constituted along the axes of ability, class, gender, and nationality’. The power of the legacy press as the sole arbiter of definition is under challenge from social media. In this sense it is a political platform where the athlete leads the agenda, and the legacy media are left to react. Andrews and Jackson (2001) could not have foreseen the advent of social media and its impact when they wrote ‘Celebrities are crafted as contextually sensitive points of cultural negotiation, between those controlling the dominant modes and mechanisms of cultural production, and their perceptions of the audience’s practices of cultural reception’ (p. 5). For how this applies in a social media context we look to Marshall (2019, p. 7) who argued:

This production of an online persona – where persona can be defined as the way in which an individual produces strategically a version of themselves to negotiate their way into some form of collective – transforms these same billions into mediated versions of themselves.

Social media is where the contemporary battle lines of cultural production / persona and reception now reside, and where definitional power over issues is distributed.

Methods

The data for this article is drawn from February 2010 and the first mention of Sterling on social media, and July 2019 just before the 2019/20 season. The Twitter feeds of *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail*’s news and dedicated sports accounts were used along with Sterling’s own personal account, seven handles in total. Tweets for the *Sun* and *Daily Mail* were collected using Twitter’s advanced search for ‘Raheem OR Sterling’ on the various *Sun* and *Daily Mail* Twitter handles, and then analysed using content analysis. The number of tweets broke down as follows: 3,402 from news organisations; these were then split into personal (Sterling the person) 845; sporting (Sterling the athlete) 2,313; and both 244. This chapter combines the personal and both tweets (1089), Sterling’s own tweets numbered 1,113. This gives a total of 4,514 gathered and 2,202 analysed.

Unlike individual journalists the official feeds of publications act like a one-way broadcast tool as there is no interaction with the audience. Moreover, as Cable and Mottershead (2018) pointed out in their research into sporting outlets use of clickbait on Twitter, these official feeds are seemingly more about generating traffic than engaging with the social aspect of the platform. This has a part to play in what they promote. For instance, in a physical newspaper the back page was reserved for sporting importance and the front for the general agenda (Hall, 1978). In a digital age those stories pushed on social media are deemed to be the most important. These are the reports with the highest social media news value, which newspapers want the audience to read and share (Harcup & O’Neill, 2017). Not only that, they are the stories that are deemed most likely to attract the biggest audience.

Similar data collection techniques were used for gathering Sterling’s media interviews. The search terms used were ‘Raheem Sterling’ and ‘interview’ on Twitter and Google Advanced Search. This garnered 99 results over the aforementioned timeframe. The interviews were chosen on the basis that they were one-on-one and not part of a press conference. In addition, Sterling’s Instagram feed was examined between all available dates from when the account

started in December 2013, through to the end of July 2019, totalling 361 posts. These different sources of information were analysed using framing, and how topics and issues are constructed and portrayed. From a media standpoint this is the ‘*selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution*’ (Entman, 2003, p. 417 emphasis in original). Whereas Sterling’s communications performed more of a diagnostic function akin to protest groups where the explanation of the underlying issues ranges from the overarching problem to a direct chain of causality (Sireau, 2009, pp. 136–137).

Findings and discussion

The findings of this research details Sterling’s shift from being an object of fascination to leading the news agenda. Furthermore, the media coverage before the racist incidents at Chelsea in December 2018 and post-racist abuse in Montenegro while on England duty in March 2019 provides context to why Sterling came to publish the Instagram post questioning the representation of Black athletes (2018b). What becomes clear in early coverage is that they play on stereotypes around black athlete’s work ethic and intelligence/mentality (see McLoughlin, 2020 for example). The first of these three, work ethic, is apparent in a story around Sterling wanting to be rested from England duty because of tiredness in October 2014. There were 23 tweets during this period made some reference to tiredness. There are, however, clear differences between the sport pages of each outlet and their more general news services. The *Daily Mail* sport section takes a considerate approach tweeting ‘Don’t kill Sterling for pulling out of the England team. It’s a cry for help’ (MailSport, 2014a). But *The Sun* is heavily critical using a quote from former professional footballer Alan Shearer: ‘The working man who is up at 6am does not want to hear how tired a 19-year-old footballer is’ (*The Sun*, 2014a). This is clearly questioning Sterling’s work ethic and coming from an ex-professional adds to its authority. Furthermore, the front-page story ‘“Tired” Raheem Sterling at 3am 3 Lions party’ (*The Sun*, 2014b) questions the validity of Sterling’s claim and acts as a form of public discipline. The *Mail* reports the same story (MailSport, 2014b) but it is balanced by both of Sterling’s managers at England and Liverpool who criticise the media, and state it was Sterling’s day off (ibid.; MailSport, 2014c).

The disciplinary nature of gossipy, celebrity style reporting around Sterling was common. Footballing heroes and role models are meant to embody certain characteristics. Therefore, the focus on Sterling’s personal actions and characteristics is an attempt to set the boundaries for what and how a footballer is supposed to act. For example, *The Sun*’s main feed tweeted about Sterling having his teeth straightened (*The Sun*, 2015a) or who he was dating (*The Sun*, 2015b). Sterling’s position as a role model was questioned in April 2015 when *The Sun* ran an ‘exclusive’ story about Sterling inhaling nitrous oxide aka ‘hippy crack’ (*The Sun*, 2015c). *The Sun* tweeted the story 25 times over 21 hours. A second video was published in June, and this time *The Sun* makes an explicit mention of his proposed transfer in the headline ‘£50m? You’re having a laughing gas’ (*The Sun*, 2015d). *The Mail* during this period had its own moral panic running photographs of Sterling smoking a shisha pipe (MailFootball, 2015).

When the England team and nationality are involved, the criticisms become even more amplified. During the European Championships in 2016 Sterling is scapegoated as one of the guilty men who are deemed responsible for the failings of the national team (Wagg, 1986). Sterling’s mentality is questioned by *The Sun* with stories about him seeing a psychiatrist (TheSunFootball, 2016a), or referring to himself as ‘the hated one’ (TheSunFootball, 2016b). But the big story of the championships came after England were eliminated by Iceland. Videos of Sterling buying his mother a house were framed as if he was flaunting his wealth (The Sun, 2016). This was perceived to ‘insult’, ‘infuriate’ fans, and he is described as a ‘flop’ (Moriarty & Wilkins, 2016). How Sterling use money and presenting him as a ‘footie idiot’ places serious questions on the players intelligence and whether he ‘deserves’ to earn a lot of money. It conflates playing ability and value with personal life. This level of distortion happens again before the men’s World Cup in Russia 2018 over Sterling’s choice of tattoo, a M16 assault rifle (The Sun, 2018). Sterling took to Instagram to explain that the tattoo is about his father’s death (quoted on BBC News, 2018). Even though the scrutiny of Sterling’s lifestyle is similar to celebrities his race and birthplace, Jamaica, adds an extra layer of complexity to his depictions and echoes the situation faced by former England international and Jamaica-born John Barnes (Carrington, 2001). Sterling was located through his birthplace as far back as 2011 setting him up as an ‘other’ when compared to white English footballers (see MailSport, 2011).

Furthermore, Carrington (1998) argues that race and national identity are often merged. The presence of England duty in the coverage only served to heighten the representations of Sterling and the racial undertones and stereotypes of the language used. It is a form of exclusion by inclusion from a ‘narrow and closed white male English identity’ (ibid., p. 101). The depictions of Sterling go counter to the traditional, working class boy done good where footballing heroes and role models are meant to fit into. Therefore, the focus on Sterling’s personal actions and characteristics is an attempt to set the boundaries for how a footballer is supposed to act, coupled with a more celebrity style of journalism, which demonises the banal disciplining players to fit into a more traditional, nostalgic style of sports star (Cricher, 1979, 1991). As *The Guardian* journalist Richard Williams once said (quoted in Boyle, 2006, p. 103), ‘A 22-year-old has money and wealth, so there isn’t that chance to experience an understanding of their way of life.’ The papers take it upon themselves to be a window onto that life. The coverage of his tattoo did lead to reflection in the sports pages with

Neil Ashton of *The Sun* walking back some of their criticism (TheSunFootball, 2018), and the *Mail's* Oliver Holt defending Sterling (MailSport, 2018). The dominant framing of Sterling weakened, in the sport pages at least. But it took high-profile racist incidents to completely overhaul his framing.

The racist abuse Sterling received at Chelsea and his Instagram response cannot be under-emphasised as the turning point in the focus of personal / both tweets from each outlet. There were 89 tweets from *The Sun* and *Mail* during December 2018, 74 of them contained references to racism. Only three racism stories appeared on *The Sun's* main Twitter account during this period, and none were put out by the *Daily Mail's* main feed. To use a physical newspaper analogy there is a real divergence in the types of stories that appear on the front and the back of the newspapers. It is evident that there is a more thoughtful and reflective process happening in the sports pages, but the more general news sections are still fixated on sensationalism, stereotypes and critique. The different editorial stances towards these types of stories from the general news and sports desks, with different editors guide the style of language and tone used.

For example, sports journalist Dave Kidd in *The Sun* denied that journalists were racist but did admit that stereotypes may trigger racists:

If people hold racist views and read about the 'bling' lifestyles of young black footballers, this can reinforce their racism and make them more likely to act hatefully.

(Kidd, 2018)

However, the general news desk at *The Sun* was less introspective calling media blame 'race rubbish' in an anonymous editorial:

Our coverage of his off-field behaviour has nothing to do with skin colour. The suggestion is ridiculous and offensive — and the idea it inspired racists is baseless. His media mates should engage their brains before dishing out accusations without a shred of evidence.

(*The Sun*, 2018)

Similarly, when England played away to Montenegro towards the end of March in 2019, several players received racist abuse from the crowd. *The Sun* called to 'stamp it out now' on their back page (SunSport, 2019), and the *Mail* incorporated Sterling's own tweet about scoring 'Best way to silence the haters ... and yeah I mean racists' into their own headline (MailSport, 2019; sterling7, 2019b). Across the sample there is only one tweet that is overtly racist, which focuses on Sterling's hair: 'Raheem Sterling wears a pineapple on his head and Twitter goes mad ...' (SunSport 2015). The article the tweet points to goes further and refers to the hair style as 'barmy' and 'whacky' stating, 'The 21-year-old has drawn stark comparison to ex-Nottingham Forest ace Jason Lee, who introduced the "pineapple" hairstyle to the beautiful game in the '90s' (Gannon, 2015).

This quote ignores the racial connotations of the 'pineapple' reference, which traces its history to an unedifying moment on David Baddiel and Frank Skinner's *Fantasy Football League* where footballer Jason Lee was ridiculed for his hairstyle (Carrington, 1998). This included segments where Baddiel wore blackface with a pineapple on his head (ibid.). Furthermore, Carrington argues the political significance of dreadlocks and the implications of this 'joke':

Rather it constituted a public challenge to one of the most powerfully symbolic forms of black cultural resistance to white supremacy by trying to belittle and therefore undermine such expressions.

(Carrington, 1998 p. 108)

The knock-on effect for Lee was that he received abuse from the terraces when he played, and in an interview with *TalkSport* in 2020 Lee said that Baddiel and Skinner had gone 'too far' (Moore, 2020). *The Sun's* tweet in this instance perpetuated these prejudices. If a Black footballer deviates from accepted and expected norms of what a footballer 'should' look like they are vilified for it.

Sterling's self-representation

Social media provides the opportunity to uncover how athletes want to be spoken about. Sterling's awareness of how this information is used has clearly grown throughout his career along with his power over his own narrative. Looking at the overall analysis of his social media and interviews is as follows:

- Twitter – most active (1,113 tweets), instant, reactionary, and platform for political commentary. This was where he discusses racism the most.
- Instagram (361 posts) – benign, post-game analysis, and more personal.
- Interviews (99 times) – much more in-depth discussion his background and issues.

Sterling's social media activity is most frequent before his transfer from Liverpool to Manchester City in 2015 (386 in total, 309 pre-June 2015). Post-transfer this drops off until the racist incident at Chelsea in December 2018 (49 times). After this event he uses his account to draw focus onto other racist incidents. For example, two of his five most user-engaged tweets were about racism. Such as, posting a 'hear no evil' monkey emoji in response to Leonardo Bonucci's downplaying of monkey noises directed at then Juventus player Moises Kean (sterling7, 2019a), and the aforementioned 'best way to silence the haters' (sterling7, 2019b). Instagram only had five posts (1 per cent), which made any reference to racism, but the post in reaction to the Chelsea incident is his second most liked Instagram post during this period (Sterling, 2018b). In the post Sterling points out the headlines where the Black player is criticised by focusing on their weekly wage, 'splashes out', 'never started a Premier League match', and there is no mention of his mother (Joseph, 2018). In contrast the white player is described as a 'starlet' who in a much more altruistic gesture bought a 'home for his mum' (Herbert, 2018). The text accompanying his post states:

For example you have two young players starting out there careers both play for the same team, both have done the right thing. Which is buy a new house for there mothers who have put in a lot of time and love into helping them get where they are, but look how the news papers get there message across for the young black player and then for the young white payer. I think this in unacceptable both innocent have not done a thing wrong but just by the way it has been worded. This young black kid is looked at in a bad light. Which helps fuel racism an aggressive behaviour, so for all the news papers that don't understand why people are racist in this day and age all i have to say is have a second thought about fair publicity an give all players an equal chance.

(Sterling, 2018b)

Sterling's Instagram post was a reaction to five years of negative coverage and stereotyping of other Black athletes. It served as a focusing event which Kingdon (2003, p. 197) describes as 'an event has only transient effects unless accompanied by a firmer indication of a problem, by a pre-existing perception, or by a combination with other similar events'. The racist incident and impact of Sterling's post on the shaping of perceptions was powerful.

In terms of Sterling's interviews, the outlets he has spoken to most is the BBC (nine times) and tabloid newspaper the *Daily Mirror* (eight times). Conspicuous by their absence is *The Sun* who did not have a one-on-one interview during this sample period. Some of the outlets are non-football orientated such as the *Wall Street Journal* and *Financial Times*. Across the sample Sterling often talks about his personal life, his upbringing both in Jamaica and England, the support of his mum and sister in helping with his career, the death of his father and his faith. Pre-December 2018 the way Sterling discusses press coverage in interviews is to express confusion at why he is reported on in a particular way. In 2018, however, recognises his news value. During an interview with Copa 90 he makes reference to his every movement having news value:

...if I go out tonight something is going to happen ... until football has finished I'm going to try to keep as much as I can, stay at my house, watch TV and no-one can say nothing.

(Copa 90, 2018)

In the *Players Tribune* article, he goes further to reflect on the reporting of buying his mum a house 'it was unbelievable what some people were writing. [...] They hate what they don't even know' (Sterling, 2018a).

But post-Chelsea abuse Sterling explicitly points to his race as the reason behind this coverage. In a *New York Times* interview Sterling believed this was the case 'one million percent' (Smith, 2019). Sterling's personal stance against racism is different to say Kaepernick in that it does not come from someone who professes an overt political consciousness. For example, the following is from his interview with magazine GQ:

ALASTAIR CAMPBELL: Are you political?

RAHEEM STERLING: No, not really (Campbell, 2019).

His stance on racism had a considerable impact on how he was covered. This is mentioned in the background colour given to an interview with the *Financial Times* where it states:

Since December [2018], *MailOnline* has published more than 1,000 stories mentioning him, but not one derogatory headline. The Sun switched to labelling him 'Generous Raheem Sterling', after he bought 550 tickets for pupils from his old school in Wembley to attend City's FA Cup semi-final there.

(Mance, 2019)

A shift brought about through a counter-framing on social media thereby challenging the prevailing narratives around himself and other Black athletes. His position meant that what he said could not be ignored by the press especially in an advertising-driven, digital business model where celebrities are newsworthy, football is newsworthy, and England players are at the pinnacle of where these two intersect.

Conclusion

The conclusion to this chapter comes in two sections. The first reflects on the impact of Sterling more generally, and the second considers the power relations between athletes and outlets. Sterling's impact more generally is evident in how he is now seen. Following Sterling's Instagram post about race and media coverage, his then boot sponsor Nike recreated their Kaepernick advert, which said 'Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything' with Sterling stating 'Speaking up doesn't always make life easier. But easy never changed anything' (Oakes, 2018). Then in 2020 during the global pandemic and protests by Black Lives Matter (BLM) following the death of George Floyd, Sterling was a guest on the BBC's flagship political programme *Newsnight* to talk about BLM but also Black representation in football management (2020). What is evident post-Kaepernick/Sterling is that athletes, especially Black athletes are willing to stand up for what they believe in. One example includes Manchester United's Marcus Rashford, who has campaigned to end child food poverty in the UK, summed up this newfound power by tweeting 'The greater the platform, the louder the voice' (MarcusRashford, 2020). Despite these gains, the press still focuses on the banal; the *Daily Mail* wrote an article about Rashford buying houses and attempt to diminish his campaigning (Buckwell & Aitchison, 2020).

As these results highlight sports people are treated like celebrities in the press' search for heroic role models and critique only serves to demonstrate that athletes are corrupt. But when this includes stereotypes around race and nationality it becomes insidious. Gossip and clickbait is driven by the economic necessity of an industry with an ever-increasing thirst for content which leads to everything being published. Super stardom means that a player must meet rather excessive and unreasonable demands of the media. For England internationals the weight of nation and expectation only adds to these pressures. What has changed since the rapid proliferation of social media is that the legacy media has lost its captive audience. Players now have their own platforms with which to communicate with fans directly, and have bigger social media followings. This has radically shifted the power balance between press and players in favour of the players. They no longer need the press for publicity. Instead, high-profile players can pick and choose whom and when to speak to outlets on their own terms. In doing so Sterling succeeded in changing his press framing for the better, creating his own 'imprint of power' he helped to raise the important issue of racism throughout all of society not just in football.

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